CHAUTAUQUA INSTITUTE
WHAT WENT WRONG?
NORMA'S QUESTION AND THE DEADLIEST SIN
June 30, 2009

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Psalm 103
Romans 3:21–28
Genesis 3:1–13

"The man said, 'The woman gave me
fruit from the tree.' . . .
The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me.'"
Genesis 3:12–13

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23

If the church has made too much of the sin of pride,
which seduces us into thinking too highly of ourselves,
it has not made enough of the sin of sloth,
which allows us to settle for being less than we can be,
both as individuals and as a society. . . .
The Judeo-Christian story places it in Eden,
where the primal sin involves refusing to take responsibility. Put on the spot,
Adam tries to excuse himself by blaming Eve, and Eve blames the serpent.
Neither cares where the buck stops,
as long as it rests with someone else.

Kathleen Norris
Acedia and Me

My education on how many people understand the traditional Christian doctrine of sin came from a member of my congregation in Chicago and dear friend. Norma telephoned and said she wanted to talk to me. She had a question, she said. When we met, she handed me a copy of the worship bulletin from the previous Sunday. The Prayer of Confession was circled in red marker. "Now tell me," Norma said, "why you make me say these things every week." The particular Prayer of Confession, outlined in red, included "laying waste the land, polluting the seas, warfare and greed, setting neighbor against neighbor, abusing imagination and freedom." "Now really, John, I didn't do all those things last week. I didn't have enough time. I had a martini at Le Coq d'Or, but that's as bad as it gets. Why do you make me say those things?"

I tried to explain that while she was right that most of us did not personally pollute the ocean last week or lay waste the land, we did

participate in big social and economic systems that did; that the Prayer of Confession is a liturgical act that acknowledges that sin is corporate and political and economic; that sin begins in the individual human heart and results in a world that is far less than the world God intends. She thought for a moment and said, “Well, they just make me feel bad, and I don’t say them and I’m not going to.” We laughed, but I’ve never forgotten the conversation, because I think Norma expressed misgivings a lot of people experience.

We’ve been thinking for the past two mornings about basic things: the matter of the existence of God, religion and science, faith and reason. We’ve looked at the fact that religion and science are not in perpetual conflict but are partners in the search for truth; that science and religion need each other to fully describe the human condition; that the first chapter of Genesis does not explain empirically millions of years of evolutionary history nor can mathematical physics explain J. S. Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D. Minor. “Science without religion is lame,” Albert Einstein said, but “religion without science is blind.” We thought about the amazing affirmation in the biblical text that human beings are created in the image of God—“almost angels”—and the radical social, political, and economic implications of that doctrine. Today: “what went wrong”—the doctrine of sin.

What went wrong, Christian faith maintains, is sin. Almost immediately in the biblical creation story things begin to deteriorate. Adam, which means “man” (Eve translates “woman”) have it very nice in the garden. Everything they need is there: they have each other, and they have the responsibility of maintaining the garden paradise by living in it on God’s terms. But somehow in this picture of perfection there is a flaw, or at least a potential flaw: a serpent, crafty, suggests that God’s terms are not always applicable. Eve is persuaded and convinces her husband (did you notice how easy he was?). Both break the terms, everything changes, their primal innocence is lost, they notice their nakedness, they begin to hide from God, and God throws them out of the garden. The next thing that happens is conflict within the family, and one son murders the other. All in all, an accurate description of the human story. But what actually went wrong?

St. Paul wrestled with the question of evil in the world and evil human behavior, making a startling admission that theologians and psychologists have been talking about ever since: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Romans 7:15).

Early church theologians concluded that it must have been sex. Augustine, perhaps the greatest thinker of the first four centuries of Christian history, proposed that the basic flaw is that our humanity has its origin in sexuality, with which he had personal struggles, and that it is conveyed from generation to generation by the way we all got here. “Our propagation is vitiated by sin,” Augustine said. In spite of everything that Augustine got

right, he is at least partially responsible for centuries of Christian suspicion of sexuality—that it is for procreation only; that celibacy is always better; even that birth control, not to mention abortion, are wrong, sinful, murder in the latter case, because sex is for making babies period, not personal fulfillment, certainly not pleasure; and that the whole matter is something about which we ought to feel slightly guilty.

A few centuries later Pope Gregory 1, Gregory the Great, formulated a list of Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Envy, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. They are not, Gregory insisted, in any order of priority or deadliness, but the traditional theological treatment of them has been that pride is at the heart of it. Pride is our basic problem. It all begins when Adam and Eve think they know more than God. And so all of us, the argument goes, who think too highly of ourselves place ourselves at the center of the universe; our original sin is the infant's living out of his or her basic needs with no thought for anything or anyone else. We never totally leave that original egotism. "The human soul curves in on itself," Martin Luther said. We can't help it. We think first and foremost of ourselves, and that separates us from God and our neighbors.

The Calvinists, our ancestors, talked about sin with what could only be called gleeful gusto. In the Westminster Confession, our founding document, written in 1643, they said, "Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned in eating the forbidden fruit . . . fell from their original righteousness . . . .became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all their faculties. . . . From this original corruption, we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil." The Calvinists, even more than John Calvin himself, were inventive when it came to describing what is wrong with us. "Total depravity" was a favorite way to describe original sin. It found its way into the old General Confession that said, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and done those things we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us." No health? Not even a little bit? Not even when we are engaged in kind and generous and loving behavior? Part of the credibility problem we have as Christians is that people know better than that. Cornelius Plantinga, a contemporary Calvinist who teaches theology at Calvin College, says that there is sin and evil in the world and human beings, but there is also goodness: "Saints, hospices, relief agencies, virtuoso peacemakers . . . wonderful bursts of hospitality for Alzheimer patients . . . exultant worship, fifty-year anniversaries, and, on some May mornings, a sense of life's sweetness and of God's goodness so sharp that we want to cry out from the sheer promise of it" (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, pp. 198–199).

Loyola Professor Al Gini says he was quite young when he realized the problem. "Growing up, I reached the conclusion that we are a glorious

species. . . . Whave achieved wondrous things . . . performed heroic deeds . . . discovered cures for age-old maladies, our machines have taken us to the moon and beyond. And yet during my formative years I also heard a very different message from priests. The message was brutal. . . . I was a scoundrel and a sinner" (*The Seven Deadly Sins,* foreword).

My experience was similar. Original sin, total depravity, was a hard sell for me. My favorite part of Vacation Bible School, which I attended with my neighborhood chums at their big Baptist church, was Bible memorization. I was pretty good at it, and I loved beating the Baptists at their own game (perhaps an illustration of what's wrong with all of us), and of course, I loved receiving the prizes. Romans 3:23 was always a favorite, always available for instant recall: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." But I surely didn't know what it meant or, rather, what the Baptists told me it meant—a list of paltry misdemeanors. Smoking, drinking, dancing, swearing, thinking bad thoughts—even then those didn't merit the eternal torment of hell they assured me I had coming.

So a reaction set in. Karl Menninger, distinguished psychiatrist and faithful Christian, said that we stopped sinning in the 1950s because we stopped talking about it. *Whatever Became of Sin?* was the title of a book he wrote on the topic, which argued that ignoring the topic is not particularly healthy. The late Phyllis McGinley, a wonderful American poet, wrote a poem in *Community Church* about the very popular minister, the Rev. Mr. Harcourt:

> The Rev. Mr. Harcourt . . .
> just the man for the community . . .
> He pleases where he serves . . .
> Cheers the Kiwanis and Eagle Scout
> is popular at every function.
> And in the pulpit eloquently speaks
> On diverse matters with both wit and clarity:
> Art, education, God, the early Greeks,
> Psychiatry, St. Paul, true Christian charity,
> Vestry repairs that shortly must begin—
> All things but sin. He seldom mentions sin.
> (*Times Three, Selected Verse*, p. 134)

The Rev. Mr. Harcourt was not alone. Nobody mentioned sin. In fact a reaction set in, a corrective of sorts, with its roots in the therapeutic community, which has always worried about and seen the effects of some of Christianity's obsession with sin and the guilt that results. Human goodness, human potential, is what we need to be talking about. "I'm OK–You're OK" reassured us that we have great promise, reason for self-confidence and self-esteem. Seminars, group therapy, the Human Potential Movement reminded

us that human beings are created in the image of God, with glory and honor, and have reason to feel good, not guilty, about themselves.

The truth about us is somewhere in the middle of that. If we are not totally depraved, we are also not without our problems. Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that the doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of Christian faith. All you have to do to see that something is wrong is pick up the daily newspaper.

It would be naïve and irrelevant simply to ignore the fact that everything is not the way it is supposed to be. You don't have to believe that we are depraved to acknowledge that we are not what we could be.

And so the question becomes, What is our problem and what can we do about it? What is the root sin, the original deadliest sin? What separates us from God and our own best selves? Augustine thought it was sex, lust. The Reformers thought it was pride, egocentricity. I think the deadliest sin just might be sloth. I think that is the point of the Adam and Eve story in the Genesis story. Adam and Eve don't live up to God's expectations. They aren't big enough, strong enough to exercise their freedom responsibly. Eve allows the snake to talk her into eating the forbidden fruit. Adam allows Eve to talk him into the same, and when confronted by God, both blame the snake. That's sloth—the absence or lack of care. In her latest book, Kathleen Norris says, "Adam and Eve don't care where the buck stops so long as it rests with someone else" (*Acedia and Me,* p. 113). That sounds familiar to me. Our problem, I think, is not thinking too highly of ourselves, but not highly enough, settling for far less, individually and societally, than we can be. Norris says that we can measure the degree to which "acedia" (another, older word for sloth) is our problem by how much evil we will tolerate. Sloth allows us to block out and accept as normal the fact that something like 80 percent of African American children don't read up to grade level, that teachers are paid less than plumbers, that we won't pay for quality education for every child. Sloth, on a broad scale, allows us to accept as "the way things are" pay-to-play politics in our state. And homelessness. Norris says it "now seems intractable, but it scarcely existed, apart from skid row alcoholics, only decades ago. For many people, the problem of homeless families whose children go to bed hungry every night, or the at least 40 million Americans who do not have medical insurance and adequate health care, are 'just the way things are'" (p. 127).

It's a matter of not exercising the responsibility to manage creation, to take care of the garden. It's not being too much but too little. And it starts in the human heart when we lose the capacity to care. It's the sickness of not caring enough, not loving enough to give everything, not loving anything enough to live for it—and die for it. Karl Menninger said our sin is looking at the world and everything that is wrong, throwing up our hands and saying,

“What, after all, can I do about it?” Theologian Fred Craddock put it more bluntly: sloth is “the ability to look at a starving child with a swollen belly and say, ‘Well, it’s not my kid’” (Norris, p. 115).

Well, if that is our problem, what should we do about it? For one thing, we should own up to it, name it. And that is why we confess our sin at the beginning of each worship service. And now this sermon takes a U-turn, in a direction we don’t expect. After we acknowledge and confess what separates us from God and keeps us from being all we can be, we don’t simply resolve to try harder, to do more good; we throw ourselves on the mercy of God. The heart of it is hope: hope for forgiveness and transformation and a new life, a life free from guilt; a deeper, more profound life of growing in grace and love and learning that to love is to live. The church used to call it sanctification: a new forgiven life that loves more, forgives more, gives more, lives more, is more deeply involved, more passionate.

At the end of the passage in Romans where Paul struggles with his own flaws with almost embarrassing honesty—“I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”—he literally cries out: “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24–25).

That is where it begins for us Christians: not with a pep talk to become more socially active, to volunteer more, to do more. It may lead to that. In fact a life transformed by love will do that. But it begins, for Christians, with the grace of God in Jesus Christ. However we define what’s wrong—the social and political structures that pollute the environment and oppress the poor, or more personally our failure of nerve to strive for more, our failure to aspire high enough, to be all we can be, our failure of heart that we sometimes try to call “compassion fatigue,” our failure to love and to care for the world and the people God has given us to love and care for, or even more personally still, the personal brokenness, the failures and betrayals that we keep hidden deeply in our hearts, hidden from everyone—however you define what’s wrong, it begins and ends for us Christians with the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

I’ll never forget the time that fell in place for me. The late James McCord was, for a long time, the president of Princeton Seminary, a first-rate scholar, a bold and prophetic leader. I was attending a conference at Princeton, and the agenda was heavy with the social issues of the day: race, poverty, the war in Vietnam. On the last evening of the conference we met in the Seminary Chapel, expecting McCord to tie it all together in a homiletical tour-de-force. Instead he preached a sermon on sin and grace. I’ll never forget it. He said to the ministers, most of us young, “Go home and preach social justice boldly, prophetically, bravely, but never forget that your people, and you, come to church on Sunday with disappointments in their

hearts—in life itself, in our society, disappointed in themselves, some of them with a sharp sense of failure and inadequacy. Some are ready to give up. They come with memories of wounds experienced and wounds inflicted on others." Over the years I've discovered how right McCord was. People come—we all come—in spite of our American confidence and can-do bravado, quite unsure of our standing with God. So the job of the minister, my job, is to tell them God loves them, forgives them, wants them to live fully, to be as much as they can be, to do as much, serve as much, give as much as they can, to leave behind the load of guilt they are carrying—God has forgiven it—and pick up the burden of being responsible men and women, faithful managers of the garden. And it begins not with a more strenuous effort, but in your heart, when you allow yourself to be loved and forgiven by God, washed clean, healed, refreshed.

In the words of the old spiritual, which McCord said was his favorite hymn:

> There is a balm in Gilead
> to make the wounded whole.
> There is a balm in Gilead
> to heal the sin-sick soul.